

Prologue

The darkened glade created a natural boundary line between the untamed wilderness of the sub-arctic forest and the savagely tamed wilderness of the large industrial complex. Giant beams of spotlight tore through the outer stretches of trees as if mankind itself were calling out “You’ll be next in line.” However, the forest wasn’t too eager to give in to civilization just yet, nor reveal all of its secrets.

Darting from tree to tree, shadowy shelter to shadowy shelter, Oren Esvios and his team approached the hulking refinery in the distance. Oren braced against a large root and a quick shallow but expressive hand movement sent three men and one woman farther into the glade. He watched as they flattened against the line of evergreens, carefully aligning themselves with the titanic trunks to hide their movements. Oren angled his head to his left where his engineer Mahko had stationed himself at a root system entombed in moss.

Mahko took a moment to recover his breathing then nodded acknowledgment. Satisfied, Oren glanced around the wide base of his tree and quickly snapped back. The ray of a refinery sentry’s light passed rhythmically over the bark where Oren’s head had been a second ago and disappeared in the same manner.

Oren reached the final grove of trees at the edge of the complex and leaned into the wood. He watched as a patrolman up above rounded his tower to observe the opposite side. Back in the shadow of the grove, the troop shifted restlessly, their arms and legs occasionally leaving the tree line’s protective silhouettes. Seeing this, Oren held

aloft his hand. “Hold,” he mouthed. The attentive leader delicately pushed off from the tree he utilized and walked toward the mass of buildings.

As he neared the border, a purple-ish glow began to play across his face. From the trees, Mahko and the others observed as Oren fearlessly, cautiously stalked up to the emerging source of the glow—a lightfence, pulsating with violet energy. Now only a few feet away, the full barrier came into Oren’s detailed view whereas from the woods it remained a shifting mirage of heated indigo-infused air. Multiple bars of lasers rose from just inches above ground to at least ten feet high, Oren guessed silently. The defense grid extended around the entire complex, interrupted only by the generator towers spaced at intervals.

Curious, the woodland inhabitants peered out from the treeline. They looked on as Oren bent over to pick up a stray branch. He examined it haphazardly before moving it in front of an eye-level light beam. Already the stick’s side facing the fence began to absorb heat and radiate. Oren pulled the singed twig away and showed it to anyone who cared – which was nearly—back in the glade. Then without his giving another look, Oren’s fingers swung the branch around in his palm so that the tip dragged through the vibrant laser beam. But as the branch returned to Oren’s hand, it did so without the tip. Oren once again showed the branch to his comrades. Its top was seared away leaving just a white-hot gash across the limb and a small puff of smoke. He waved his team forward from the trees and transitioned to a palm-down “stay low” gesture.

Four pairs of legs knelt down in the soil next to Mahko and Oren at the lightfence. “Only Mahko and I will enter the facility. I won’t risk anymore. You all, secure the perimeter,” Oren spoke softly.

As he said this, the youngest team member, Harry, glared at the laser’s point-of-contact with the tree branch. The sight of the impossibly hot, surgically precise wound on the stick caused a lump to form in his throat.

“Is that understood?” Oren asked, seemingly for a second time. Harry removed himself from the stupor and nodded slightly. Oren exhaled and looked back toward the refinery. “Trust me, there are worse things than lightfences here.”

That was Mahko's cue to unsling his tattered shoulder-slung pack. It slumped into the dirt as various curiosities resettled in the bag. Mahko flicked on his headlamp and started to dig in the bag. Oren watched as his supposedly bespectacled genius of a companion rummaged through what could pass for a child's schoolbag. After a few seconds, Mahko began to pull up on a long brass-colored instrument. It took a second effort to shake loose and free the extensive device from the bag. Finally, Mahko laid it on the ground not far from the lowest beam.

The gadget resembled two large mirrors attached back-to-back with a small connecting rod and a metal seam. Mahko slowly moved the contraption in the dirt toward the bottom of the lightfence. He stuck out his tongue once the mirrors were near enough to start glowing from the heat. With one last exhale, Mahko slid the gadget far enough for the mirror's long edge to break the lightbeams. His invention was tall enough to intercept not just one but the four lowest beams comprising the ground level of the lightfence. As the beams quickly moved across the mirror's edge, it heated up with a vicious orange-red color before the reflecting metal-and-glass of the actual mirrors crossed the beams' paths. Once the violet lasers began to bounce off the shiny mirror, all energy and heat transference seemed to stop. The pulse of the lightfence, however, quickened *and reversed* back toward the generator towers on either side.

Mahko eased for a moment and smiled back at his co-conspirators. His childlike sense of pride was summarily trounced when he met Oren's steely gaze. There wasn't the time for amusement, it read. The engineer re-balanced his lenses on the bridge of his nose. He returned to the device and placed fingertips on the cool edge of each mirror. With a bit of effort, Mahko spread apart the individual mirrors a few inches at a time. Neither the energy beams nor mirrors showed any sign of difference in their behavior while it took place. Little by little the gadget created a gap four beams high up from the soil. As Mahko continued to separate the opposing mirrors, the onlookers watched as the added tension drove the base of the machine into the dirt completing its foundation.

Now Mahko prepared for the final step. This time, he refused to claim any additional glory in the faces of his teammates. This time, he would claim it with demonstration. He closed his eyes, inhaled deeply

and released. And again, he took in a breath then exhaled. Oren barely resisted rolling his eyes at the ritual taking place. But before he could instill a word of haste, Mahko thrust his forearm between the mirrors and — by way of his talent — between the lightfence’s deadly beams themselves. Harry’s eyes widened upon seeing the engineer pierce the grid, now reduced to empty air between mirrored fixtures. Mahko paused with arm outstretched. Then he waved it up and down in the innocuous space in the lightfence. After a quick display, he retrieved his arm and leaned back into a squat within the group.

There was the glory he desired. So much better this way, Mahko seemed to express.

“Let’s go,” said Oren, cutting short Mahko’s beaming pride. Oren faced the group once more. “If the patrol returns before we anticipated...” He trailed off, knowing those under his command could finish the thought.

“Then we’re fucked. Right, Oren?” Mahko must have traded simple inference for prowess in the more scientific areas. Oren sighed in agreement. He figured it was a worthwhile negotiation his engineer’s parents had unknowingly made long ago. Oren dropped to his knees and elbows before the gap in the barrier. He lowered his head and shoulders, then kicked off from the dirt. The motion carried his prone form almost entirely underneath and through the beams. Oren glanced back at his ankles and feet still technically in danger and quickly pulled them through toward his chest. Perhaps he wasn’t the most graceful commanding officer of a ragtag squad. He shrugged at the subordinates over top his trail in the dusty soil. Nowhere was there a signature on a dotted line saying he would be.

In immediate reply, Mahko lowered himself to the dirt, planted, and kicked his body through the minuscule tunnel between beams, well below any laser-induced danger. Mahko completed a lithe upward maneuver to stand up again. He stared back at his squad mates via the violent, violet light-rays. And then he waved.

I selected him, Oren remembered. “Come on.” He tugged at Mahko’s sleeve.

The pair made swift strides across the inside of the enclosure, ensuring their path took them through patches of darkness and obscurity. Around them the soil began to take on a distinctly metallic sheen. Craggy bits of earthen material had collected and coalesced into more

noticeable, shiny trails through the dusty ground. Hardened over millennia, mined from below in hours, and then forgotten as cartload spillage in minutes, the mineral detritus seemed to guide Oren and Mahko toward the most obvious entrance into the refinery: the workers' gate.

Several inches and several thousand pounds of ore-infused, carbon-reinforced alloy blast door greeted the men. Already Mahko was rummaging in his pack. Taking advantage of his engineer's distracted search, Oren pressed an ear to the great steel door. Oren detected the generic factory hum. Nothing indicated the day's workers or even the plant's sentries were performing the last daily check-in of the interior gate.

"We're clear for now."

"Clear enough for this?" asked Mahko. He gripped tightly in his hand a mass of tangled wires that looped in and out of one another before linking into an oblong plastique core. To Oren it could have been a foundations-level science project on which his mother would have certainly done most of the work.

"I really" — Oren sighed — "really hope so."

Without hesitation, Mahko plastered the science project onto the blast door just above the latch. He brought thumb and forefinger to his tongue to wet them, then used the appendages to form an ad-hoc circuit between a coil of neon blue and black wires.

Mahko stepped back, paused, squinted, and then took a second, longer step back away from the door. He grinned sheepishly at Oren with teeth stained from the metallic soot on his fingers. Oren shook his head and hastily joined Mahko at his side to observe.

He didn't quite clear as much ground as he would have liked before the science project spewed sparks and noxious vapor from its rear. Oren clasped his hand over his mouth before the vapor washed over them. "What the—" he exclaimed, the last words muffled by his hand. He waited for the mucous-like feeling of tainted steam to pass over and behind him, at which point Oren delicately opened one eye.

Oren saw as Mahko raced forward, gleefully rubbing his eyelids free of char and vaporous remains, to the blast door. The man exercised restraint as he splayed his palm and fingers around the latch, now surrounded by a deep gash in the metal belching smoke. Mahko applied a small amount of pressure and even that was enough to swing

the door inward on its hinge. Oren had the early peek through the gap in the door frame to the filthy floor that had recently been carpeted with thick remnants of ore vapor like forested fog on a chill night. Still-molten sparks of alloy on the ground shone up through like reddish insect eyes on such a forest floor, causing Oren to take stock of each footstep he made into the room.

The hollow entry chamber's alloy linings amplified the refinery's dull hum. Oren clocked the unremarkable features in the room. Lockers filled with hardhats and worn jumpsuits formed the outer walls. Pipes and copious ventilation shafts spider-webbed across the ceiling. There were arrows and markings to denote where a doorway would lead in a pathway through the complex, but no decoration otherwise. A simple track inset in the floor grates guided prop-carts through the factory during daylight hours. Thoroughly uninterested, Mahko made to walk beyond the surveying Oren. Oren instantly stretched out his arm to halt the engineer.

Wordlessly, Oren reached farther along the wall with his same outstretched hand. His knuckles rubbed against the wall at eye-level in a bizarre caress of the metal. After a moment, he felt his fingertips touch on and wrap around something invisible to Mahko only a few feet away. Oren suddenly yanked firmly at the air. He next presented an open hand with a series of improbably thin fibrous tendrils weaving through his fingers. Mahko followed Oren's gaze back up the siding to a flat, translucent rectangle perched inches below the roof. They watched as a small light behind the plate hiccuped, faded, and perished into the dark.

"We can't be leaving traces," said Oren.

Mahko looked incredulously back at the blast door at their rear. Its dismembered latch continued to dissipate heat from the intrusion.

"Too late for that, I'd think," he said.

"Traces of ourselves. The job could've been done by anyone. Our task is to see this job done by *no one*."

"Funny," replied Mahko. "We only started caring about being noticed when you took over operations."

Oren did not bristle. He knew his engineer, but he also knew a fashionable response was wasted on him. "Bigger operations require fewer loose strings," intoned Oren. He dangled the fiber wire before him to punctuate his sentiment. "You were focused on being bandits

to the Outland miners before I joined up.” “And we’re not bandits now, taking from these miners?”

“The ore sector isn’t investing in lightfences and fiber infrastructure for their blue-collar miners.” Oren cast the frayed wiring to the ground. “So if they’re not average miners, we’re not average bandits. Now let’s get moving. We’re wasting time and I don’t know the exact route to the hub.”

Mahko feigned disbelief as Oren trudged farther into the structure ahead of him. “*You* don’t know the exact route? First surprise of the night.”

Their journey into the depths of the refinery took them through a manageable set of hallways and antechambers all dressed up the same as the entry room. Gray, metal, and spartan tunnels were the prevailing design theory. Oren reached an intersection and halted within view of a warm orange glow coming from a side passage. The first signs of life were quickly joined by fleeting, raucous laughter cutting through the dull roar in the hall. Oren detected Mahko slowing his footsteps to stop along the wall behind him. He faced Mahko before pointing to the nearby arrow diagram painted on the wall. *Control Hub*. His fingers traced away from the designation, eventually leaving behind the wall and directing Mahko straight down the hallway ahead. The engineer nodded in understanding. Oren held up his palm again.

“Give me some fireworks. *Non-lethal*, please.”

Mahko obliged. His hands felt around for the top of his pack while his eyes stayed vigilant on the criss-cross of pathways before him. He placed an orb pockmarked with tiny vents and with a slightly larger central iris dominating the upward-facing side. “Once you pop it, don’t look at it.”

Knowing full well what his trusty mechanic was capable of forging, Oren could not resist shivering slightly at the imagined danger. He nodded once then cocked his head to the side, motioning for Mahko to venture along the hallway further in his quest for the hub. As soon as Mahko’s shadowy form went from an outline on the corridor wall to blending in with the dark, Oren pushed away from the wall in search of the orange light source down the opposite hall. He crept low as light and sound from the night-shift intensified in the distance. The hallway opened up after fifty meters onto a somewhat thin alloy

catwalk. Oren hesitated to put his face into the light just yet and held onto the wall as he leaned into the large room.

It was ten meters down to the ground floor of this cavernous space. Oren locked onto the loading bays at every major chute that would be flowing with unprocessed ore and residue during the daytime. Each passage was accompanied by a hydraulic arm for heavy lifting duties when the strength of even multiple adults failed to stir a bucket load of raw material. Actually, Oren surmised, these machines were more likely propulsion arms if the technological investment inside matched that of the machines outside such as the fiber-line and fencing. Indeed, the arm nearest to his vantage point had the tell-tale crystalline veins of an exo-machine running alongside the joints. *Expensive*, he thought.

Another shout rolled up from the ground floor. The processing chamber was unceremoniously converted into a type of barracks for the late crew. Entire packs of cards were opened and strewn about on the soot-laden tables. Players sat at careful intervals to protect their hands as well as provide elbow room for the large mugs of etha, the deep brown liquor that accompanied any game worth playing out here in the middle of nowhere. Oren could never hope to see precisely from here — he'd been forced to go without scope so as to not interfere with refinery transmissions — but he assumed it was a classic outlander game of Rights. His mind flashed to an old round of the frontier-style poker before jarringly returning to his task.

Unfortunately, his task's difficulty had increased in magnitude upon stumbling over this relaxing card game. Oren counted eighteen workers, between the card players themselves, spectators, a few losers now only playing spectators, and one particularly jovial person serving as impromptu bartender for the session. *Eighteen people to deal with isn't so terrible*, Oren reasoned. *But eighteen people and him...* He turned to look at the figure slumped into a chair at the far end of the room near the sizable main entryway. The Metro officer was clad in all black, his joints and vital areas covered in deliberate, ribbed patterns of alloy atop the fabric. An assault-style pulse rifle lay against his leg, barrel in the air and steaming with violet prop energy.

Oren inhaled deeply, preparing to make his move. His extreme attempt to breathe in calmly and quietly was nevertheless rendered unnecessary by another round of shouts and laughter from below as the

table lead miscalculated a buy and allowed the game's Large Two to stake claim to the winnings. The oddly mathematical game of Rights never seemed the type for drunken play, but Oren supposed that brazen, illogical betting was part of the fun. Well, brazenness and gambling was fun when a loss was just a fraction of a credit between mining pals and not something more.

The chatter and clinking of glasses provided Oren's best opportunity to move from the outcropping created by the hallway onto the alloy catwalk high above the revelry. He would not press his luck by moving any quicker. Still, the inevitable time-crunch of Mahko getting to the control panel early (or even on time) caused sweat to bead on Oren's neck as he crouched and walked along the metal beds. Once in position, by Oren's reckoning, he listened for any signs of his being noticed. There were none.

The next round had started and the Metro stared blankly at his wards or at the floor or at his compensatory gun. Oren removed the orb from his pocket for a once-over. The little holes along its armor felt weirdly sharp as they touched his skin. He figured it was simply evidence of the engineer's homegrown talent—function over form. With one last rotation of the gadget, Oren brought the front to face him. *Don't look at it.* He moved his thumb over the iris and pressed inward. The button clicked satisfyingly. Oren held the orb at arm's length and extended it out from the catwalk bridge over the card game. And he let go.

Clink. Mahko's toy hit, but did not noticeably bounce on the craftsman table below. Immediately, the Rights players stopped any discussion. Most placed their hands face-down to hide them from prying eyes that were trademarks of an outlander card battle.

"The hell is this?" the Large Two asked, as he reached out with a sinewy forearm to grip the orb. From the background, the Metro leaned sideways in his chair to focus on the disrupted game, squinting though his eyes were hidden behind an opaque shock visor.

"What in the fires?"

"Did it fall from the ceiling?"

Miners looked upwards at the catwalk but could not hope to see Oren flattened on the metal floor. The Large Two gazed at the iris on the device. It glowed faintly with a cyan light. Suddenly, the same hue arced across the surface of the orb as each vent hole linked with a

counterpart on the opposite side of the sphere. A latticework of blue energy raced around the object's shell, illuminating the whole table with a bright flash of brilliance. The items' unfortunate wielder dropped it with a shout, his vision having suddenly blackened and blurred from the intensity.

Oren sensed swift movement in the chamber. Indeed, the Metro had leaped up from his makeshift guard post and made a beeline for the commotion at the table. He watched as the officer closed the distance to the orb, ready to intercept it. But as he approached the farthest spectators from the card table, the orb contracted its panels into itself and sent a wild shockwave reverberating out into the chamber. The miniature blast sent the closest miners sailing and spinning away from table, still seated in their chairs, and stopped the Metro dead in his tracks.

"Get the hell away from it!" commanded the cold, modulated voice inside the Metro helmet. On cue, the orb swelled up again. The energy-laced veins on its shell mixed and meshed and intensified so that it became a completely white-blue sphere on the table. Miners flew away from the table, protecting their heads and necks as they ran away. The Metro began to back away toward the port closest to his old chair.

Oren watched the proceedings from above. He gritted his teeth, anxious to see what terror he'd been handed to disperse the locals. Below him on the card table, the orb glowed what seemed beyond physically possible for an object. It started to rattle from the output, leading into a roll around the inner part of the table in a path determined by forgotten stacks of cards and overturned etha glasses. When it came to a halt at an arbitrary mug, Oren held his breath. He unknowingly did it in chorus with the workers, who had ceased shouting to observe whatever came next for them and the object. They all got their answer right away.

A soul-piercing klaxon sounded out from the device like a demonic whistle. It sent knives into Oren's eardrums so that he could only pity the workers below who were much closer to the display. They stumbled about half-blind, half-deaf, and all-terrified in their search for an egress. But pity was not enough to keep Oren stationed there any longer in the sonic maelstrom, so with fingers plugging his ears, he stood and escaped from the walkway.

Back and back he traveled through the last of the hallways he'd taken away from the intersection with Mahko. His eyes had adjusted to the dim lighting again and he noted the familiar curve in the wall leading to the Control Hub. The aural torture of Mahko's plaything continued filling the passageways albeit at a much lower intensity. At last, Oren followed the markings to his final destination at the hub. He found it odd that, while the halls were formed of cheap alloy and concrete lining, the control center featured a miniaturized lightfence serving as its door. Naturally, it was deactivated with wiring askew all along its far edge. The deadly gate was obviously recently disabled by an engineer. Still Oren thought, *this whole complex is illogical—and expensive*. He crossed the threshold into the L-shaped room studded with endless monitors and gauges. "Mahko?" Oren hissed into room. He stalked toward the far wall, which opened up into a second smaller area on the right side.

There stood Mahko, firmly shackled by black-clad arms across his chest and mouth. The Metro towered above Oren's mouse-like cohort and easily overpowered any attempts to message for help with a movement of the hand or head. Oren's eyes drifted for a second to the open panel behind the pair. It straddled one of the conduits leading out of the control hub into the deeper parts of the refinery. The panel had been torn clean off by a wrench or some other nigh-magical device Mahko had brought with him. Resting atop the inner conduit was a mangled set of highly contrasted wires that were his trademarks.

"Remove the device," the trooper let crackle through his visor, "and you can leave with your lives."

Mahko squirmed helplessly in the brute's grasp. "You mean the rest of our lives in the Arx. I'm not going to the fuckin' Bright Hall." He spit out the words then spit out the rest of a blood and saliva mixture. The Metro slowly tightened his grip. It was a nearly invisible move to the common eye, but not to Oren's. And the resulting pressure was definitely not invisible to the engineer in custody.

"Fine. Let him do it," Oren declared. "I can't do it myself."

The trooper spun Mahko on a dime facing away from him. In a painfully balletic move, he kicked out at the back of Mahko's knees as he turned. Bone caps hit floor so that the greasy machinist coughed up anguish and surprise all at once. "You have ten seconds to get that off," spoke the Metro officer. "Starting three seconds ago – seven..."

Oren knew the Metro was far too concerned with aiming his propped-up pistol barrel at the geometric center of Mahko's skull to notice exactly which wires his man fiddled with. The always deliberate – if reckless – engineer's fingertips slid along a stout emerald wire. As they reached the midpoint, he neatly danced a centimeter over to a rose red circuit underneath his own device's web of cabling. This was the weighty performance of a veteran pianist in the guise of a gearhead. Mahko dove into his movement's crescendo when he dropped a small screwdriver from sleeve to hand.

“Five.” The Metro cracked his neck to punctuate.

Mahko slid the pinhead-sized driver head into the red cabling, dissecting the ground wire from the rest of the packet. He gave it a slight jiggle to ensure its berth before tapping the driver handle – ring finger, pinkie, and ring a second time. The combination sent an infinitesimal arc of lightning from tool to wiring and quickly down into the wall panel.

The pulser pistol moved forward, menacingly pressing Mahko's head inward. “Three,” said the Metro soldier. Mahko seemed to embrace the pistol's movement. He knelt even lower to the floor so that the Metro was forced to lean forward, head over knees and horribly off-balance at a chance. “Coward,” continued the Metro. “Two.”

But Oren did not hire cowards. He knew this intimately and beyond all doubt. When the first sign of the interior wall buckling ripped a seam in the alloy-concrete mixture, Oren had already matched Mahko's posture on the ground. Specifically, he made sure his body – like his engineer's – was immediately protected by the heavy console cabinetry in front and not exposed to upper wall.

In an instant, the barrier between control hub and power reactors disintegrated. A bright flame shredded through the wall in the exact pattern the thermal management conduits formed. Oren looked up from cover as the exploding gridlines tore into the hub with a loud, concussive blast. The Metro never did finish his count. He took the brunt of shockwave in his unbalanced torso so that his body rag-dolled feet-above-head five meters backward into solid metal.

Oren felt a hand on his shoulder – Mahko's – dragging him upwards out of victorious shell-shock toward the door.

A minute of hard sprints back toward the entrance carried the two through the dark processing room and out through the unhinged por-

tal, its latch and lever now restored in color but looking more like a cooled lava flow. Oren felt soil underneath his boot again, sending relief up his body. The feeling was short-lived. A bizarre intake of air behind them and what he assumed was intuition caused Oren to glance back at the refinery. Blue, vaporous tendrils directly followed by lashing orange flames cascaded through the hallway. They coalesced in the workers' room, roiling and tracing along the vents and walls before exploding out the threshold in a massive blast. Mahko left Oren's peripheral vision, but not by choice. The explosion sent him flying forward into the dirt. Oren himself was caught off-guard by the intensity and corkscrewed through the air several body lengths from Mahko.

When his vision returned from a storm of dust and blurriness, Oren honed in on his ward laying face down. Mahko stirred from his blackout; he looked down his body in search of the pain tearing into him. His ankle faced the wrong direction.

Oren pushed up and ran to his friend, lifting him as fast as he dared move that kind of injury. "Mahko, get up. I'll help you, but *get up*." Green lines cut through the haze and traced along their footprints. Snipers up in the tower had received enough info to look for the intruders. Oren felt Mahko collapse slightly under his own weight on the bad joint. Why the shock and adrenaline weren't enough to carry him, Oren could not understand. There wasn't time to think. *Phewt! Phewt!* The gunman's first potshots kicked up wisps of dirt in their general, but thankfully not exact area.

First through the haze were the high-energy beams. They cast a particularly eerie glow where the purple fencing meshed with fiery vapor and glittering ore-tinged dirt creating a tiny, apocalyptic sunrise in the near distance. Next, silhouettes appeared in the space between generator towers. Oren could make out Harry and one other peering into the facility for signs of life. The others were likely in cover behind the towers.

"Covering fire!" Oren yelled at no one in particular. He was rewarded for his open call. Cracks of sound rang out and bullets whizzed above his and Mahko's heads. A week ago, that would have been terrifying for the pair. But Oren had picked this team. And picking a team meant he spent hours on their knowledge of both the mission and the skills required to pull off said mission. In the brief,

soundless moment after a bullet soared an inch too close to Oren, he recalled standing next to Harry at the unused quarry. Harry had had to “split the stone” by placing a bullet-hole on an already established bullet-hole tens of meters away. He did that – after a time and some adjustment on the stock by Oren – and earned his spot on the squad.

They reached the lightfence. Oren allowed Mahko to fall to his knees in front of the mirror device where they had breached. “Help me get him under,” Oren said. He was now able to discern Toryuk firing away next to Harry. “Get your ankle in there so they can pull you through,” he directed at Mahko. The man obliged lowering himself painfully to the dirt and sliding one leg then the other between the gap in the lowest beams. Harry and Toryuk each took a leg, braced, and yanked backward for Mahko to emerge through in one motion.

Oren used the interlude to get his bearings. Back at the refinery door, he watched as the Metro from the card room burst out into the smoky night air. “Caelum’s fire,” Oren swore under his breath as if someone would hear him over the commotion. The pitch black visor looked left, right, and then straight ahead at Oren through a window in the haze. “Oh shit.” It didn’t matter who heard Oren at that moment. Like a bladecraft hitting the sound barrier, the officer launched into a full sprint at the lightfence – and at Oren.

The commanding officer dropped to the ground and kicked his way beneath the lasers. Toryuk grabbed him under one arm and helped him to his feet. As soon as Oren stood up, he tapped Harry on the shoulder. The rookie of the litter nervously shifted his awareness from the guard tower he’d sighted to Oren.

“Gun,” issued Oren. Harry didn’t hesitate, handing over the pistol. Oren instantly hoisted it to shoulder level and aimed at the facility. The gesture didn’t slow the Metro officer a beat. He continued to charge at Oren and his team. *Blam! Blam!* Oren fired twice at the Metro. The first bullet clanged off his shoulder armor. The second buried into the officer’s torso – a killing blow for anyone without access to alloy-laced fabric in their outfit.

“He’s gonna shred us when he gets through the fence!” exclaimed Harry.

Oren smiled wryly. He angled the gun-sight slightly downward. And waited. “Whites of their eyes,” mused Oren, as Harry looked on in fear.

“You can’t see shit through that visor!” Harry shouted, backing away toward Mahko, Toryuk, and the assembly of companions at the edge of the glade.

In the reflection on the Metro’s visor, Oren waited. The officer snarled from under the mask, which emitted a metallic growl in sequence. He launched himself into a dive and slid headfirst at Mahko’s mirror device. The lowest beam refracted off the helmet in a still-bright line absent of hue. *Whites of their eyes.*

Oren pulled the trigger. His shot landed perfectly on the mirror’s edge, sending it twisting out of position into a wobble. The flat base pulled up out of the dirt. The beams reconnected. Oren found himself staring into the opal headpiece worn by the officer. The Metro’s hand still clasped the pulser. His torso, on the other hand, no longer clasped the bottom half of his body. A cauterized waist and singed legs rested beneath the indigo fire of the lightfence. They began to sizzle as Oren turned away.

“Get him an exo,” Oren said, giving Mahko a reassuring squeeze on the shoulder. Toryuk scrambled over holding an exo-sole, a shoe-sized metal platform with short clamps rising on each side and small propulsion veins winding along the edges. He affixed the platform below Mahko’s injured foot where it adhered automatically and the propulsion channels whirred to blue, glowing life.

Toryuk, Mahko, Harry, and the remaining team members ambled proudly into the woods at a clip. Oren wanted one last look at his work. His was not a face of pride, however, but one of uncertainty and regret. Sadly, he turned away from the complex and left for the shadow of the woods. Behind him the cacophony of sound hid anguished cries. Rising fires began to overtake the tallest reaches of the factory. An entire pocket of civilization had been engulfed in flame and doomed to ashes or worse. And this was Oren’s job, his duty. He would long for the days of simple mercenary work before he was done ruining the new world piece by piece.